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MEMPHIS PROSECUTOR TO HEAR EVIDENCE ON KING

MEMPHIS, Tenn (Reuter) - A Tennessee prosecutor said Thursday his office will interview witnesses who allege they can prove James Earl Ray was not behind the 1968 slaying of civil rights leader Martin Luther King.

But District Attorney General John Pierotti, who up to now has called the case "a sham and a fraud," said he will not grant immunity to anyone claiming to have been part of a conspiracy to murder King.

"If someone actually is guilty of capital murder and I give him immunity just to clear the books on this, I ought to be run out of town," the prosecutor said.

Pierotti's remarks came as the ABC-TV prepared to air an interview with Memphis businessman Lloyd Jowers, who claims he played a role in a conspiracy to assassinate King.

ABC said in a statement Jowers, who owned a restaurant located below the boarding house where Ray was staying at the time of the assassination, will tell ABC's Prime Time Live program Thursday evening that he hired someone other than Ray to carry out the killing.

King was killed April 4, 1968, on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis.

Ray, who has long maintained his innocence in the slaying, is serving a 99-year sentence.

On Tuesday, a Shelby County grand jury refused to grant a hearing to a private Memphis attorney who wants to subpoena five witnesses whose testimony he claims would exonerate Ray.

Lawyer Wayne Chastain, acting on the instructions of Ray's attorney, Bill Pepper, applied for a hearing before a grand jury in Tennessee in which he would name a retired U.S. businessman who claims to have hired the man who killed King.

King's family have declined to comment on case. But the Rev Jesse Jackson, who was with King at the time of the shooting, said Sunday he has always suspected a conspiracy.

The latest episode came to light over the weekend, when a London newspaper, The Observer, reported that a Memphis businessman confessed to arranging King's murder in exchange for a $100,000 payment from two other men, including one with alleged links to the Mafia.

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